

Why the OAC should talk

Another perspective on the communication problem in the Old Apostolic Church (OAC), a debilitating feature that stymies growth and development and which, if left unheeded, must ultimately lead to the demise of a once great church.

It was the last straw, it is often said, that broke the camel's back.

A controversial control measure which is apparently coursing through the administrative labyrinth of the OAC, seems to have all the elements to possibly present itself as a proverbial "last straw".

Controversial measure

From the Eastern Cape, it is anxiously reported that OAC officers are now expected to sign a form apparently indemnifying the OAC against claims arising from officers sustaining injury or personal loss/damage while on official/church duty. Controversial, because on the one hand it is commonly interpreted as a case of officers having to **sign away their rights**, while on the other hand it is a measure that holds serious implications for the activities of the church since it has, inter alia, the potential of barring talented, highly skilled and self-respecting persons from aspiring to serve the Church in any capacity. The manner in which the issue is being conducted, also seems to be attracting unwarranted negative public attention.

Like so many times in the past, it seems that another controversial control measure is about to be introduced in the Church without ever having been subjected to the necessary consultation and deliberation processes expected (in the year 2013) of any organization/institution the size and significance of the venerated Old Apostolic Church. Controversial, because it highlights again the major **structural flaw** in the administrative architecture of the OAC - the absence (formal exclusion) of a meaningful say by congregations (members) in the running of the affairs of their church. No formal broad-based discussion at all about any important issue. If this style of management has endured until now, then congratulations to the leadership; but it is not sustainable. It is reckless and, therefore, cannot be regarded as the wave of the future. And as The FORUM has agitated so many times before, the best interests of the OAC are not being served this way by the current generation of leaders.

No consultation

At issue here is not so much the control measure itself, but the fact that it is about to be introduced arbitrarily and then implemented like a law of the Medes and the Persians. No prior consultation or discussion with congregations. If implemented in the alleged intended fashion, this measure will become a blunt instrument for dealing with a very sensitive issue that has wide-ranging human rights implications. Therefore, this issue needs to be exhaustively interrogated so that everybody is clear about its intent and extent. Will there be **exemptions**? And if so, when, where, why and to whom will it apply? Since members/officers of all ranks and station in the OAC are compelled to actively engage the "outside world", as well as to be highly productive within the Church, the

importance of this issue cannot be ignored. It is also important to note that the OAC is headquartered in cosy, posh **upmarket neighbourhoods** where the “angels” live and the “privileged class” are free from danger, but another kind of “heaven” exists in the socio-economically disadvantaged “non-white” **townships** where the law of the gun, drugs, rampant crime and all other social ills often predominate. So, when a well-heeled conservative “white” minority leadership of the OAC edicts a controversial control measure of this kind, it is immoral (if not criminal) and unfair to impose it arbitrarily on their “non-white” brethren, as seems to be the case now in the Eastern Cape.

Is the “mighty” OAC really going to look the other way, when an officer (or member) should seriously fall victim to a violent attack, injury or damage to personal property while on official duty for the Church? And if so, that could well be a “last straw” to break the proverbial camel’s back.

And if they refuse?

An obvious question that jumps out of the pack is: what happens to an officer who refuses to sign the indemnity form? Will he be coerced to sign under the threat of removal from office? Will it be a condition of service for new entrants to the clergy? These are some of the salient points that can only be effectively cleared up in a forum where members/congregations are engaged in broad-based consultation and deliberation. The high-level annual conferences (open only to the top leadership in the OAC), therefore, **ring hollow** when the well-being of the OAC and its congregations are in jeopardy. Essentially, the OAC is skating on thin ice, because all that is required is for one or more congregations to adopt a motion of no-confidence to trigger a constitutional crisis in the Church. The “mighty” OAC is constitutionally not as sound as conventional wisdom would have everybody believe.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to dwell on the merits and demerits of this controversial measure or to prescribe **policy**, but rather to focus on the controversial and insular management style of the leadership of the day in this regard, as well as the need to talk. The South African society is caught up in a fast moving cycle of socio-political change, and there is no way that the leadership of the OAC can hope to survive with an **outdated** “apartheid style” approach to managing a multiracial and multicultural religious establishment – financially one of the largest in the country.

Protest

Key to the South African success story of transformation is, talk, consultation, joint deliberation and above all, sufficient consensus. The OAC leadership would do well to remember that their members are from that same constituency and if the need should arise one day to resort to civil disobedience over an issue within the Church, the OAC could well become a battlefield for public protest and violence just like any other similar scenario in the country. Next to politics, the church is invariably a highly combustible area of operation as far as human development is concerned. The OAC is **not immune** in this respect, especially as long as money and unbridled power in the hands of a (non-elected) few seem to be the principal drivers of the establishment.

Dialogue

And the real problem? It is communication, communication and communication!!!! And more succinctly, the lack of the required degree/format thereof within the church, as well as with society

at large. Dialogue is not even a **lost art** in the church, it never really existed since its formation. The little semblance/embryo of it that existed pre-1972, was snuffed out after the major schism of that year. Unlike most other churches today, members/congregations of the OAC have **no idea** of what it is like to have a meaningful say in the running of the affairs of their church. This is a ticking time bomb for the OAC, because money and power are at issue.

Issues

It is fascinating to observe how members/congregations/officers in the OAC are going about their activities as if they are not affected by the social ills of society around them. As if to say that they are not affected by issues such as substance abuse, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, gangsterism/crime/juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancies, early school leaving, dysfunctional households, homosexuality, old-age care, etc. Truth is, that a **sizable constituency** of OAC members account for the high statistics in this regard, but the problem is conveniently side-stepped by the OAC and dumped on the rest of society and other (financially weaker) churches which have made it their mission in life to respond to the plight of the needy and the “least important”, those who are the closest to the heart of God and on whose account He rewards the faithful with soul salvation. In this respect, the OAC leadership is patently missing in action, but yet aspire to find favour in the eyes of the Lord.

The OAC with its considerable financial muscle under the present management, is not formally/structurally geared to relieve suffering and come to the rescue of the destitute within in its own ranks, let alone society at large. As one of South Africa’s senior corporate citizens, the OAC has a **social responsibility** and should be seen to be pulling its weight in this regard. As long as the public/official face of the OAC is perceived as an ultra-conservative (minority) “white” one, the Church is still light years away from dealing with its morally reprehensible apartheid past. The sooner it starts practicing what it’s preaching, the sooner its apostles will be taken seriously as **spiritual leaders** of note in this country. We should talk less and start doing something useful. If Jesus (and the Apostle Paul) were in the flesh today, He probably would have reserved His harshest comments for the OAC on this score, just as He often embarrassed the Pharisees and Sadducees of His time. No wonder, growth and development in the Church are lacking and the intake of new members continue to show a steady decline. Now, what self-respecting person in his/her right mind would want to join an establishment with such a profile? Again, The FORUM is not calling for instant solutions; all it says is, put in place systems/structures/processes/strategies and programmes to inculcate and ensure a culture of meaningful dialogue.

And then there is the issue of **racism** in the OAC – an abomination and an affront to God’s creation of man. The public record of the Church in this respect has yet to be sanitized. It is incumbent upon the current generation of leaders, who are still indirectly related to the apartheid era in the OAC, to lay to rest the ghost of “OAC apartheid”. Because if they don’t, it would be tantamount to a father bequeathing a “nightmare” to his children. It brings to mind the rhetorical biblical question of the kind of father who would give his son a stone instead of bread and a snake when what’s really needed is a fish. The fact that a handful of apostles have apparently resolved the race issue among themselves is **not the solution**; there is an entire country evenly dotted with OAC congregations where it still needs to be “talked away”. Continuing embarrassing incidents of racism in the present-day OAC do not occur (hopefully) at the level of the apostles, but **in congregations**. And it is at this

level where this **cancer** in the OAC body can be effectively isolated and excised. Mere vindication of The FORUM's clarion call for constitutional reform in the OAC, so that congregations can take up their seat (direct representation) at the conference table in order to restore the administration of the Church in accordance with the civilized norms of this Age.

All the above-mentioned issues will not disappear if left alone, as per the apparent "ostrich approach" presumably preferred by Head Office. If the OAC wishes to grow and develop optimally, it will sooner or later have to face up to its past and deal with it, in much the same way other churches in South Africa dealt with their apartheid baggage. It is not only the ethical, moral and honourable thing to do, but it is the right thing to do. Regrettably, it is the OAC we are talking about here.

Disconnect

A direct result of the communication dilemma, or absence of formal dialogue in the Church, seems to be a glaring disconnect between leaders and members/congregation that becomes evident if members (and an alarming constituency among officers) are put on the spot about official policy and other aspects of the OAC brand. The level of ignorance is not only embarrassing, but also damning and counter-productive for a church that seeks to recruit new members as a matter of policy. Forget about vocabulary, substance is amiss. And the reason? Because of a culture of "shut up and do what you are told", they have never acquired the art of being **comfortable** in their own skins and to be able to articulate to a skeptical world the attributes of a Church uniquely positioned in the realm of Christianity in this so-called Space Age, where members of the human race are almost on the verge of leaving the planet to settle somewhere in the great beyond.

This situation often leads to what almost amounts to dysfunctional congregations where singing, praying, preaching and tithes seem to be the only purpose for their existence. The disconnect seems to be **exacerbated** by a perceived absence of a realization and urgency among the leadership to address the issue. In fact, it gets worse because there seems to be a general perception among them that they are on the right track and that advice from beyond their circles is not welcome or needed. This is another lethal blunt instrument in the hands of many lower-ranked (and some senior ones) officers who are often hopelessly out of their depth when it comes to conducting themselves appropriately in situations where they are confronted with perceived difficult questions/critical thought.

An unpalatable truth is that most members/congregations (and most officers) of the OAC – one of the biggest social establishments in the country - have **no experience** of formal church meetings and conferencing. In fact, they have **never** seen the inside of a conference hall. This is where this religious colossus (OAC) fall far short of even the smallest churches in the country. And yet, we (OAC) fervently go out to recruit new members to join this wonderful church of ours. Reality dictates that we should get our act together.

Why talk?

Because there has to be - and it is the right thing to do - a constant public discourse about governance throughout an establishment such as the OAC, since too much money and power are concentrated in the hands of a small number of (not elected to do so) lay preachers to the **exclusion**

of everybody else (congregations), without the necessary checks and balances in place to ensure open and accountable management of the scarce resources of the Church. And **because** the OAC seems hamstrung by the glaring lack of bold and dynamic leadership that is required to bring its administration into the 21st century as far as universally accepted norms are concerned.

It is **disturbing** to often glean from comment by several (obviously) immature senior officers that members of the OAC actually have no rights in their church. Some of them are more forthright and have allegedly been heard to state that “the OAC is not a **democracy**”. According to the ORDER of the OAC, members and officers are supposed to focus solely on the spiritual dimension and leave the management of the temporal side of things (financial and capital resources of the Church) to the “significant few” OAC members who are often less qualified to do so than the “many” who fill up the pews and shore up the tithes. Fortunately, this situation is **not sustainable** and will rather sooner than later be consigned to the trash bin of the OAC’s history.

What happened to core moral values such as integrity and social conscience? As long as the apostles of the OAC unilaterally hold sway (and apparently resolute not to desist) over the material resources/assets of the Church, they cannot claim to be **untouchable**, because their spiritual position is seriously compromised by the corrosive impact of the proverbial “root of all evil” – MONEY, SECULAR POWER and all their so-called attendant rascals. Occasionally (and at crucial times) it is almost impossible to hear what they are preaching, because the **cash register** is ringing too loud. In this regard, their (top leadership) soft underbelly is coquettishly left exposed. However, there is nothing as wholesome like a good old chat and a healthy debate to help make things right.

Case in point

Following, are two incidents which actually took place. For the moment – no names, no pack drill, no embarrassment for the hapless officers (details are available). And just before the spotlight is automatically trained on the “non-white” side of the line in this regard, it needs to be said that it occurred in what is regarded as traditionally “white” congregations, with “white” officers in the dock:

- After the service, the Elder called everybody to attention as he had a very important announcement to make. As from tomorrow, he pontificated, you will notice building contractors setting up camp on these premises for repairs and renovation to the building. He cautioned members not to enter the premises or engage any of the workers in conversation over their activities. Should members have any questions, they should approach their Priest.
COMMENT: His demeanour during this briefing came across as cold and calculated and seemed to convey the unambiguous message to members that what was going to happen in their own backyard was “none of your business, so hands off”. And of course, members, perplexed as they were, instinctively knew that they dared not offend the dear Elder by asking him any questions. They traditionally reacted like ignorant spectators at their own Xmas party in their own home. And to think that we still want people to join such a church who often presents itself as the “laughing stock of the neighbourhood”, when it comes to its administration.
- After the service, the Priest asked the congregation: “Brothers and Sisters, do you notice any difference around you in the church hall? There was a deafening silence, amplified by

curious/stupid looks around the hall for clues. Nobody could detect anything new or probably have noticed any building operations at the premises prior to this particular Sunday. Later, the Priest triumphantly announced that the inside of the hall had been painted and spruced up by a building contractor assigned by Head Office. And since the monthly meeting was due the following Wednesday, he implored everybody to turn up in significant numbers so that a resounding vote of thanks could be obtained and a letter sent to Head Office as a token of the congregation's appreciation for the sterling work done by Head Office.

COMMENT: He acted more like an agent for Head Office, instead of serving the best interests of the congregation.

The anatomy of these two cases just about sums up the status of members/congregations regarding the administration of their own church – **spectators** at their own show and even paying to be insulted. I am sure many other congregations in the OAC can attest to being treated in similar fashion, if not worse, when it comes to what is universally accepted in the world of churches for members/congregations to have a meaningful say in "OWN AFFAIRS". Hidden behind this autocratic way of running the administration of a church, are issues such as tenders and **tender policy**. It is no secret that several of the senior officers who sit in Head Office meetings where the business of the OAC are conducted and approved, are contractors themselves who often partake of church contracts or have an indirect interest in the rewards flowing from OAC tenders. Missing, of course, is the voice of members/congregations as part of the kind of **checks and balances** required to ensure openness and accountability in a financial and real estate empire the size of the OAC, especially in a business and political environment where corruption is of major national concern .

If OAC congregations had their own elected local church councils and direct representation at regional and national levels, we would be talking here of a completely different ball game in the OAC. The current leadership is safely ensconced in a seemingly impregnable **comfort zone**, which must account for the lethargy (if not unwillingness) to entertain any call for constitutional change and administrative reform. For example, who guards the **guard** when salaries, allowances and other perks need to be determined and approved? And who is there to say **NO**, on occasion when top leadership are about to be awarded bonuses and pay increases for poor work output or abject failure? That is why The FORUM is adamant - and so in tune with the suppressed concern among members/congregations - that it is time for the OAC to "TALK".

Not the same

The OAC of the year 2013 is no longer the same church that was founded by the Apostle George Klibbe. While changes (over the years) to the administrative model is understandable, it is the supposedly inviolable doctrinal domain that saw several **fundamental shifts** after 1972, following the major schism which gave birth to the Reformed Old Apostolic Church (ROAC). These fundamental shifts relate to etiquette and the formularies regarding deaths, sealing, faith healing, the sacraments of the holy communion and baptism, etc., and continue to be the source of immense anguish and uncertainty among members (and officers) of longstanding in the Church. Those members who joined the church in the late nineteen-eighties (1980's), lamentably have no idea of what is being referred to here. What complicates this issue is the fact that, despite all these fundamental changes, the leadership still maintain that **nothing has changed** in the Church. They

seem to live in denial of this metamorphosis of their own doing. The result of this phenomenon is that there are now two types (schools of thought) of members/officers in the OAC – those who adhere to the old and those (post 1972) who know of no other (former) precepts. Again, congregations (the Church) have been **ignored** and accordingly excluded from all the relevant processes/actions entailed in these landmark developments. Like a Trojan horse, a **manmade CHURCH ORDER** now seems to be holding both leadership and members/congregations to ransom – most of us (top leadership included) seem to be more scared of the revered ORDER than even God. The last time an ORDER had such clout was when Jesus and the apostles were up against the Pharisees/Sadducees and the Jewish Council. Again, another reason why the OAC should talk. Or is this perhaps one of the reasons why talk in the OAC has been “**outlawed**”?

Future

No crystal ball is needed to realize that the future for the administration of the OAC incontrovertibly will have to be a more democratic dispensation, where congregations will take up their **rightful place** at the conference table across the entire spectrum of management in the Church. The current generation of leaders is an ageing group which inevitably will have to make way for a more progressive-minded new leadership. And the more the current leadership seem to be **inflexible** and entrenching its outdated approach to management, the more obvious it becomes that they will probably go the same way of **defeat** as the leadership of the now defunct National Party, the godfathers of an obnoxious lifestyle and policies that have universally been declared a crime against humanity. Therefore, the plea to them is: start mending your ways and help build a better tomorrow; don't spoil it for your **children** – you cannot rule from the grave. And the only sensible starting point? We should talk!!!

Enemy

Again, The FORUM is not the enemy of the OAC. It is merely holding up a **mirror** to the leadership, saying: “take a look at yourself, and the Church”. The real enemy of the OAC are those pockets of influence within the ranks of the current leadership of the OAC that are against change and reform. Those who seem duped and blinded by a comfort zone which ostensibly promises them a glorious retirement deal. Like John The Baptist, The FORUM is a **lone voice** in an OAC desert, assisting with the preparation of the way for the coming of a new brand of leadership whose **higher calling** in this century will be to turn the OAC into the spiritual fortress and powerhouse it is destined to be on this planet.

The **major challenge** today for a church of the spiritual magnitude of the OAC is how to maximize its apostolic mission in a socio-politically free society such as South Africa, as opposed to its biblical forebears who were trapped within the political web of the mighty Roman Empire. That is why it is untenable to have an OAC leadership that seems **averse** to a democratic dispensation as far as its administration is concerned, a dispensation that would respond positively to the core of the guidelines for human behavior as entailed in the gospel of Christ.

One cannot help but get the feeling that most OAC members and officers are under the impression that “their” God will never allow “their” Church to perish. However, they would do well to study the history of **Jerusalem** and discover that it was the very same God (of the OAC) who mandated, directed and orchestrated the epic fall of Jerusalem following fruitless attempts by various prophets

of that time to warn the Israelites about God's disapproval of their wayward conduct. Whereas no church can exist without an **ORDER**, it should not be allowed to degenerate to the level referred to in Mark 7: 6-9. That is why The FORUM cannot and shall not keep quiet; and why the OAC needs to talk!!!

Strategic imperative

Looking objectively at statistics regarding policy, strategy, activities, pronouncements, achievements and failures, the important question the OAC has to address is: are we succeeding with our spiritual mission or are we better at **empire building**? In less than ninety (90) years since its formation, the proudest boast today in several OAC circles seems to be that we are one of the biggest financial institutions and real estate barons in the country. However, the survival (and best interests) of this success story can only be guaranteed by the **decentralization** of authority, and not more centralization of power. Intrinsic to these dynamics must be a healthy spread of adequately skilled officers and empowered members/congregations, a glaring omission at this stage. The current architecture of the balance of power in the OAC constitutes the kind of milieu that usually benefits the possible hijacking of the management of such an organization/establishment by **extremist** forces from the left or the right.

Approaching its **centennial**, the OAC would do well to recognize that it has reached a **crossroads** as far as balancing its apostolic mission with its enviable financial capacity. Mapping out the road ahead, therefore, cannot be the sole preserve of the leadership in its current form (and mentality) as far as management is concerned. The sooner congregations, with their exceptionally strong **regional impact**, are accommodated in a new (more inclusive) constitutional dispensation, the sooner the OAC can graduate to the next level in order to give real content to its apostolic mission. But we have to talk. Especially in view of the disgusting apartheid history of the OAC, we must talk about who we are, where we come from, where we ought to be, and above all, how to get there.

Let's talk

Any contemplated action(s) aimed at creating a better tomorrow for the OAC, must as a matter of course take effect today and has to include the active participation of congregations at the **decision-making level**. Ideally, it should have commenced yesterday. The **pertinent** question though to any current senior OAC leader ought to be: where, and how, do you see the OAC's administrative architecture twenty (20) years from now? And if he does not understand the question, then he has no business sitting where he is now (and getting rewarded for it).

Because of the absence of dialogue and the damper on critical thinking in the OAC, one of the **consequences** of this immature management style is that ordinary issues such as an indemnity form, for example, tend to become highly sensitive and controversial socio-political hot potatoes threatening the livelihood of a religious community. And the problem? Poor leadership, or the patent lack of leadership.

Judging by the **current mood** in management circles, it would appear as if the point might soon be reached in the OAC where any attempt at redress/transformation by the leadership would be interpreted by members/congregations as succumbing to pressure by The FORUM. Only bold, dynamic and visionary leadership can obviate such an **impasse** in the administration of the Church.

The future has to be an **improvement** on what we have now. That is what The FORUM's obsession with reform and transformation is all about. The survival (and growth) of the financial empire of the OAC will increasingly depend on the skills of adequately trained officers and suitably empowered members/congregations. That is why it is imperative for the people of the OAC – top management and congregations - to talk.

There is no workable alternative. It is the only way forward for the "mighty" OAC.

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